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Reagan's Inner Conflicts May Be Key

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When Secretary of State George P. Shultz sits down with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko Monday, much of Washington will focus on another high-level confrontation: the battle between Ronald Reagan, anticommunist, and Ronald Reagan, peacemaker.

According to many insiders, the latter private negotiations could prove decisive to the prospects for arms control in President Reagan's second term.

With senior aides divided into two groups on either side of the imaginary table, the politics of the second administration again will be colored by a struggle between moderates and hard-liners—or, as some would say, naive dreamers and skeptical realists.

But such a portrayal is too simple to fit the facts. The arms control issues are more complex, the internal alliances more shifting and the outcome far more dependent on outside factors—such as Soviet intentions and the stability of Soviet leadership—than such a picture would suggest.

Yet the contrast between the Reagan who described the Soviet Union as "the Evil Empire" in 1983 and the Reagan who held out an olive branch at the United Nations last fall is real. So is the bitter split within the administration, exemplified by the curious phenomenon of every top arms control aide trooping off to Geneva with Shultz, as if each camp wanted to keep an eye on the other, even during a two-day preliminary session.

"Reagan would like to achieve the kind of success in arms reductions that would make him known as a peace president in a second term," one administration official in the "moderate-naive" school said.

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Even a totally unified administration would be challenged by the problems:

- A new generation of mobile, easily hidden nuclear weapons, such as sea-based, low-flying cruise missiles or truck-mounted intercontinental missiles such as the U.S. Midgetman now being developed. These will be more difficult for intelligence satellites to find and, therefore, more difficult for treaties to limit.
- An increasing emphasis in both countries on the defensive arms that were limited by the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, until recently considered one of the few successes of U.S.-Soviet negotiation. This emphasis has injected complicated issues into the talks and could prompt both sides to look for new offensive weapons to overcome prospective defense, some experts believe.
- Widely divergent views in the two nations of who is "ahead," whose weapons are more dangerous and who is the aggressor in world affairs. One result is that in the United States, and probably in the Soviet Union, there are few if any weapons systems that the military is prepared to forgo.
- The conviction in the Reagan administration, and probably in the Politburo, that the other side is untrustworthy and likely to use arms control talks only as a cover for building or retaining military superiority. The deep suspicion of Soviet intentions is shared by Reagan and his top advisers, including those who are considered "moderate."

"The problem is that the Soviets seek absolute security in a way that guarantees insecurity for everyone else," Shultz said in a recent speech, adding that they "can be expected periodically to do something abhorrent to us or threaten our interests."

The United States has 26,000 nuclear warheads, according to the respected Nuclear Weapons Databook, ranging from nuclear land mines to the destructive and accurate warheads of the Minuteman 3 missile. The Soviets' stockpile is between 21,000 and 42,000, according to Arms Control Today.

Officials in both countries acknowledge that such vast arsenals do not make sense. Beyond that agreement, however, they have not found a way to reduce their stockpiles while trusting their counterparts to do the same.

Staff writers Lou Cannon, David Hoffman, Don Oberdorfer and Margaret Shapiro contributed to this report.